Today in History - January 22

Linking the Keys

On January 22, 1912, the nearly twenty thousand residents of the city of Key West, Florida, located on a small island some 128 miles south of the Florida peninsula, observed the completion of an overseas rail connection to the mainland. The Florida East Coast Railway served the island until 1935, when it was destroyed by a hurricane. It was replaced in 1938 by the Overseas Highway, built on the foundation of the old railroad bed. This system of forty-two bridges, which connects the Florida Keys to the mainland, is one of the longest over-water roads in the world.

The construction of the overseas railway linking the Florida Keys to the mainland was the last major project undertaken by pioneering Florida developer Henry Morrison Flagler. After losing $100,000 in the failure of his first business venture, Flagler earned his fortune as a founding partner of Standard Oil. He visited St. Augustine in 1883 and, realizing the potential for the development of improved hotels and transportation, began construction in 1885 of the 540-room Hotel Ponce de Leon. Flagler then bought and upgraded the Jacksonville, St. Augustine & Halifax Railway, built a railroad bridge across the St. John’s River, and by 1894 had extended the railroad to Palm Beach, where he developed two large hotels: the Hotel Royal Poinciana and the Palm Beach Inn, later renamed The Breakers. Flagler’s mansion, Whitehall, a wedding gift to his third wife, Mary Lily Kenan, was constructed in Palm Beach in 1902.
In 1896, Flagler extended his railway to the area that was soon named Miami. His investments in the town included the Royal Palm Hotel, opened in 1897. Henry Flagler died in 1913, a year after the completion of his renamed Florida East Coast Railway to its southern terminus in Key West.

Key West, the southernmost city of the continental United States, is a sand-and-coral island approximately 4 miles long and 1.5 miles wide. American businessman John Simonton acquired the island from a Spanish army officer in 1822; by 1823, the U.S. government officially recognized it as a part of the United States.
Learn More

- Search across the collections on the term Key West to locate images and recollections of the island. There is an 1884 panoramic map of the city two years before a fire destroyed its downtown area. The Library's Maps Collections include early maps of a number of Florida cities. Zoom in for a closer look at houses, parks, boats, fishermen, bridges, and much more in fine and accurate detail.

- Early railroad maps record the nation's growth. Search on the term Florida in Railroad Maps, 1828 to 1900 to learn more about railroad operations in that state. These maps are a part of the Transportation and Communication section of the library's Maps Collections.

- The Library's Digital Collections contain many images of Key West (known to Spanish-speaking Floridians as Cayo Oeste) including subjects such as cigar packing and a sponge exchange. Search the pictorial collections on the term Key West.

- A cigar-maker familiar with the cigar industry in Key West discusses his experiences in “Mr. Fermin Souto,” an American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940 interview. Search that collection on the term Key West to find additional life stories that touch on this location.

- Learn more about the history of Florida or the railroad. Search Today in History on these terms for information on a variety of topics including: the military governor of Spanish Florida, Ponce de Leon; Florida's secession from the Union; the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad; and the Oahu Railway.

- Search on Key West in Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885 to see two sheet-music versions of the “Key West March.”